

## Kol Nidre 5770

The following are reported to be children's messages to God.

"Dear GOD,  
Is it true my father won't get in Heaven if he uses his bowling words in the house?  
\* Anita

Dear GOD,  
What does it mean You are a Jealous God? I thought You had everything.  
\* Jane

Dear GOD,  
Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.  
\* Tom

Dear GOD,  
I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it.  
\* Nan

Dear GOD,  
It rained for our whole vacation and is my father mad! He said some things about You that people are not supposed to say, but I hope You will not hurt him anyway.  
Your friend  
(But I am not going to tell you who I am)"

At least with children, communication with God is pretty simple. And what children want from God is also very clear.

But what is **our** relationship with God? How do we communicate with God and how does God communicate with us? The question took on a new direction for me several weeks ago while I was preparing for the Torah reading of Va-ethannan. The book of Deuteronomy reviews much of the Torah and Va-ethannan includes the second description of the revelation on Sinai, the second listing of the Ten Commandments. Immediately following the commandments, Moses continues with a report about the Israelites in chapter 5, verses 19 through 28. Moses recalls that God spoke to the whole nation. And when the Israelites heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, ... all [the] tribal heads and elders ...said, 'Let us not die, then, for this fearsome fire will consume us; ....' ...You [Moses] go closer and hear all that the Lord our God says, and then you tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will willingly do it.'

... And God responded: 'I have heard the plea that this people made to you, [Moses]; they did well to speak thus. May they always be of such mind, to revere Me and follow all My commandments, that it may go well with them and with their children forever!... "'

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Could you imagine anyone today, in this era of spiritual searching, being that close to God and saying “let me out of here, let my agent close the deal; I have nothing to say to You, God, no complaints, no requests, no need to modify anything You, God, might want me to do?!” Moreover, as the *Etz Haim* commentary notes: (pg. 1022) “God appreciates the reverence that leads the people to make their request. ... Implicit in God’s words is the concern that their reverence will diminish as the experience [of Sinai] recedes from the people’s memory.” I think God was onto something there.

But in addition to distancing themselves physically from God, with no need to dialogue with the Eternal Sovereign of the universe, did you catch the commitment our ancestors made on **our** behalf? It appears in

verse 24, where the Israelites tell Moses: “you tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and **we will willingly do it.**” This parallels the phrase from Exodus 24:7 “All that the Lord has spoken we will faithfully do!” That is the translation of the famous Torah phrase: *na-aseh v’nishma*, “we will do and we will hear.”

The implication is that our ancestors accepted God’s message to us, namely the Torah, for us, for you and me, and for all generations to come. We might question their right to do so, but is it any different from our American ancestors accepting the Constitution of the United States for all generations to come? We know pretty precisely how and by whom the Constitution was written. The origin of Torah, the five books of Moses and the rest of our Bible, the *Tanakh*, for those who can separate intellectual honesty from pure faith, are really shrouded in the mystery of a mountain ablaze and ancient writings of uncertain authorship.

And yet, when the great Conservative Jewish philosopher and mystic, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote *God in Search of Man*, he noted: (pg. 25) “The Bible is not the only work in which a concern for the ultimate religious problems is found. ... Yet the Biblical period is the grand chapter in the history of man’s wrestling with God (and of God’s wrestling with man). ... It is, therefore, the age of the Bible, a thousand years of illumination, to which we will turn for guidance.

What do we and the people of the Bible have in common? [Heschel asks] The anxieties and joys of living; the same sense of wonder and the resistance to it; the awareness of the hiding God and moments of longing to find a way to Him.”

As I see it today, the American Jewish community is increasingly self-dividing into three groups: those who long to find God in the ways Jews have for centuries; they continue *na-aseh v’nishma*, we will do whatever the Torah, mediated by the rabbinic tradition and authorities, tell us to do – that is Orthodoxy in various forms; those who long to feel God in their lives, but really are engaged in *hishmia v’na-aseh mah she-na’aseh*, dear God, listen to what we want Jewish tradition to be and we will do what we choose to do – that is the liberal movements and includes those who want to be trans-denominational; and, finally, those who have completely cut themselves off from the Jewish community, if not from God.

Today, the largest number of affiliated Jews in the United States belong to the Reform Movement. At the risk of grossly oversimplifying, one of the key aspects of Reform Judaism is individual choice which is along the line of Reconstructionist

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Judaism, one of whose mottos has been that “tradition has a voice, not a veto.” And if we were bluntly honest about it, how many Conservative Jews sitting here tonight, or sitting in any Conservative synagogue tonight, or even sitting at home, even give tradition a voice, let alone a veto? We have become Jews of individual choice, deciding not only what is right for us personally, but what Conservative Judaism ought to be, unburdened by the texts and traditions of either the past two thousand years or even the past one hundred years. Nor do I reference the huge social issues that have occupied us for the past few decades: the women’s issue, the gay/lesbian issue and the intermarriage issue. These are all serious issues that deserved our attention because they would have drawn the attention, and did, of the Jewish community in any era, no matter how each would have been or will yet be resolved.

But there are issues of education, kashrut, Shabbat, festivals, the High Holidays and funeral practice among others where there is little disagreement or controversy about where the official beliefs of Conservative Judaism stand and yet where most of Conservative Jews act. I do not think that you will find many, or any, Conservative rabbis who think that Rosh Hashanah is one day – but you will certainly have no trouble finding thousands of Conservative Jews who have made it one day. I do not think you will find many, if any, Conservative rabbis who think Yom Kippur is not a 25 hour fast, except for those with medical issues, and yet you will have no trouble finding thousands of Conservative Jews who think Yom Kippur ends after Yizkor, or the sermon, or when they feel they have had enough. I do not think you will find many, if any, Conservative rabbis who think that Hanukkah or Purim are more important than Sukkot or Shavuot, but we all know which are more observed. Within the past few weeks, I have had different people try to convince me that above ground burials and cremation are now part of Jewish tradition. I am not naïve and I am fully aware that both take place regularly in many places in the United States. In such instances, I would try to convince people to follow tradition, but if I fail, I will help them within the limits of Conservative Judaism. But surely no one is going to convince me that they are part of Conservative Jewish tradition, let alone Orthodox, as someone was trying to convince me.

I am very confident that you will not find even one Conservative rabbi who does not value continuing Jewish education whether for children or adults, but I am certain that you will find many Conservative Jews who think Jewish education ends with bar or bat mitzvah, or after college, or when one gets to be “too old” whenever that occurs. This has become such an issue that at our first Lehigh Valley Clergy meeting of the year, one of my rabbinic colleagues pleaded with us to emphasize Jewish education during a sermon on the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, the real term for the High Holidays. So let me be clear, there are enough studies available that we know, for children, the ideal is Jewish Day School education. The next best choice, which still meets the needs of most families, is supplemental school. It faces far more challenges than day schools because of the time of day, but surely is better than any other formal option we have as yet developed. Jewish overnight camping can be a vital and successful component of Jewish education. And our tradition has been clear that Jewish learning is supposed to continue until the day we die. The commitment of adults is supposed to be steady and continuing, not just an occasional lecture, movie or four week mini-course.

I want to pay public tribute to some of our members. I have met with a couple of women for several years tutoring them in Hebrew. Since last March, I have met with a small group of dedicated members who want to celebrate an adult bar/bat mitzvah. I am

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impressed with their devotion and seriousness of purpose, particularly since we have had to devote a great deal of time to sharpening Hebrew reading skills. What I have seen, once again, is that inner motivation is inevitably the key issue. Those in their eighties, like younger adults, are capable of learning to read Hebrew; maybe not as fast as they would like, or as perfectly as they might like, but steady progress comes with dedication to learning. I hope that many of you will come to hear this class chant a haftarah next spring. But I hope even more of you will consider some form of serious Jewish learning whether it is through Brith Sholom, or Project Yachad, or from any Lehigh Valley synagogue, the Berman Center for Jewish Studies, or the J.C.C., all of which offer classes and lectures on some ongoing basis.

There is only one other area of communication I want to address tonight, and that is prayer. This is a topic of urgency within the American Jewish community, and frankly the Christian community as well, and certainly within Conservative synagogues. For many people, I suspect that communication with God means prayer. But as I look out, especially on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I recognize how little the machzor with the “High Holiday” liturgy, speaks to so many sitting in front of me. There are some scattered moments of engagement, the *Avinu Malkeynu*, *U’netaneh tokef* and *Kol Nidre* come to mind, but too often I have the sense that the service is dead space, we come to listen, not to God, but to Sam or Ken. And if our Hazzan is not chanting, and if I am not leading an English reading, many of you, perhaps most, would prefer holding a good novel to the machzor.

At the beginning of the week, Sam emailed me an article from the September 20, 2009 edition of The New York Times Magazine. Written by Zev Chafets, a Jew, it was titled: “The Right Way to Pray?” Chafetz began by examining Christian evangelical prayer. Writing about himself, Chafetz noted: “I am, and always have been, a Sam Cooke agnostic: ‘I don’t know what’s up there beyond the sky.’ And I have never been able to pray and mean it. On the two occasions when it appeared I was going to die, I didn’t give God a thought. ... Thinking back, though, I find it disappointing that, faced with mortality, I worried about whether I had remembered to lock my front door.

But I am in a small minority, at least in the United States [Chafetz continues]. According to a recent study by the Pew Forum, 75 percent of Americans report that they pray at least once a week. Interestingly, only 39 percent attend a worship service once a week or more frequently. Steven Waldman, the editor-in-chief of Beliefnet.com, says he thinks this gap means prayer in America is becoming detached from traditional denominations. ‘In a way, prayer has become its own religion in this society,’ ... ‘People pick and choose. They want to be their own spiritual contractors.’”

A few days before Passover, Chafets went to see Rabbi Marc Gellman, the Reform rabbi of “God Squad” fame. “ ‘There is no prayer harder than suburban Jewish prayer,’ Gelman said. ... [and went on] People come to temple to identify with other Jews, or socialize. The writer Harry Golden once asked his father, who was an atheist, why he went to services every Saturday. The old man told him, ‘My friend Garfinkle goes to talk to God, and I go to talk to Garfinkle.’”

I am not so troubled by those who come on Shabbat to talk with “Garfinkle” at Kiddush. Community, the *kehillah kedosha*, is an important part of Jewish tradition. Where else is there a weekly opportunity for the Jewish community to get together and feel a sense of extended family? But what of prayer? Once again, we see that people

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pick and choose, and want to be their own “spiritual contactors.” No doubt, that is why so many say the mourners kaddish at home alone. Neither tradition nor community matter any more.

Rabbi David Wolpe, a pretty popular and well known rabbi, the son of Rabbi Gerald Wolpe, of blessed memory, and a very respected Conservative thinker from California where he is the rabbi of a large congregation, an author and teacher, wrote: “ ‘I’m spiritual, but I’m not religious.’ How many times have we heard that phrase? Let’s try to understand it.

Spiritual is what one feels. Religious is what one does. So you can announce yourself as spiritual and never join a community, never visit a home for shiva, never contribute money to a synagogue, school, Jewish center or soup kitchen. In other words, all too often ‘spiritual’ asks nothing of us – it is the narcissism of non-involvement.

There is a purity to non-involvement of course. Spirituality allows one to feel good about oneself. I am in touch with the great forces of the world. I am a deep soul. In contrast to the crass materialists out there, I do not allow myself to be diverted by mere physical things, because I am spiritual. Hillel famously said, ‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me?’ He followed that with: ‘If I am only for myself, what am I?’ Notice that the great Rabbi could not even define an individual as one who cares only for himself. Spirituality alone is sanctimony, unworthy of God’s creations. Spirituality tied to action is a truly beautiful thing. We have a word for it – religious.” I am really glad that David Wolpe wrote that and not me.

Here’s another quote I am glad I did not write for public consumption. In the September 25, 2009 Forward that arrived at my house over Rosh Hashanah, there was an article about the Conservative Movement including excerpts from an interview with Rabbi Steve Wernick, the new executive director of United Synagogue. Talking about our worship services, he is quoted: “How can we make our prayer experience sacred, an experience spiritually uplifting? ... My crass comment on this, [Wernick said] is that you very often walk into a Conservative synagogue and it’s very often, ‘Mumble, mumble, mumble, Hallelujah, page 91.”

He continued, “ ‘I think that part of the problem of the contemporary synagogue is that we’ve over-institutionalized them and we’ve over-professionalized them. As such, we’ve turned congregants into audience members and passive participants, as opposed to active members of a community who really support each other.’” I had not even received the Forward when Rabbi Wernick sent out an email apology doubtless to the entire Rabbinical Assembly. His remarks may have been made “off the record,” but I suspect they reflect what he feels and I doubt that he is very wrong. Of course, there is even more “mumbling” at Orthodox services and they are the best attended – how ironic.

In some fundamental way, I would characterize the problem as whether Jews today want to listen to God, and to the tradition God at least may have initiated, or are we only interested in our own perspective which we wish the synagogue would embrace. Do we listen to God, or does God have to listen to us? When we answer that communication question we may be able to figure out what kind of Judaism will endure. Some form of Judaism will surely be eternal, of that I am positive. But whether that will be anything other than Orthodoxy, I am no longer so sure. But if traditional prayers, and services, and holiday celebrations, and kashrut, and Shabbat and serious learning are

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either dead or whatever we choose them to be, the individual communication may live on, but the community will not.

Something to think about on this, of all days, when according to tradition, we are to spend the day in prayer, talking to God.

Gmar khatima tovah.